



## “GENTLEMEN, THE KING!”

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THE room was large, but with a low ceiling, and at one end of the lengthy, broad apartment stood a gigantic fireplace, in which was heaped a pile of blazing logs, whose light, rather than that of several lanterns hanging from nails along the timbered walls, illuminated the faces of the twenty men who sat within. Heavy timbers, blackened with age and smoke, formed the ceiling. The long, low, diamond-paned window in the middle of the wall opposite the door had been shuttered as completely as possible, but less care than usual had been taken to prevent the light from penetrating into the darkness beyond, for the night was a stormy and tempestuous one, the rain lashing wildly against the hunting-chalet, which in its time had seen many a merry hunting-party gathered under its ample roof. Every now and then a blast of wind shook the wooden edifice from garret to foundation, and caused a puff of smoke to come

down the chimney and the white ashes to scatter in little whirlwinds over the hearth. On the opposite side from the shuttered window was the door, heavily barred. A long oaken table occupied the center of the room, and round this, in groups, seated and standing, were a score of men, all with swords at their sides; bearing, many of them, that air of careless hauteur which is supposed to be a characteristic of noble birth.

Flagons were scattered upon the table, and a barrel of wine stood in a corner of the room farthest from the fireplace. But it was evident that this was no ordinary drinking-party and that the assemblage was brought about by some high purport, of a nature so serious that it stamped anxiety on every brow. No servants were present, and every man who wished a fresh flagon of wine had to take his measure to the barrel in the corner and fill for himself.

The hunting-chalet stood in a wilderness, near the confines of the kingdom of Alluria, twelve leagues from the capital, and was the property of Count Staumn, whose tall, gaunt form stood erect at the head of the table as he silently listened to the discussion which every moment was becoming more and more heated, the principal speaking parts being taken by the obstinate, rough-spoken Baron Brunfels on the one hand, and the crafty, fox-like ex-Chancellor Steinmetz on the other.

"I tell you," thundered Baron Brunfels, bringing his huge fist down on the table, "I will not have the king killed. Such a proposal goes beyond what was intended when we banded ourselves together. The king is a fool, so let him escape like a fool. I am a conspirator, but not an assassin."

"It is not assassination, but justice," said the ex-chancellor, suavely, as if his tones were oil and the baron's boisterous talk were troubled waters.

"Justice!" cried the baron, with great contempt. "You have learned that cant word in the cabinet of the king himself, before he thrust you out. He eternally prates of justice; yet, much as I loathe him, I have no wish to compass his death, either directly or through gabbling of justice."

"Will you permit me to point out the reason that induced me to believe his continued exemption and state policy will not run together?" replied the advocate of the king's death. "If the king escapes he will take up his abode in a neighboring territory, and there will inevitably follow plots and counter-plots for his restoration; thus Alluria will be kept in a constant state of turmoil. There will doubtless grow up within the kingdom itself a party sworn to his restoration. We shall thus be involved in difficulties at home and abroad, and all for what? Merely to save the life of a man who is an enemy to each of us. We place thousands of lives in jeopardy; render our own positions insecure; bring continual disquiet upon the state; when all might be avoided by the slitting of one throat, even though that throat belong to the king."

It was evident that the lawyer's argumentative tone brought many to his side, and the conspirators seemed about evenly divided upon the question of life or death to the king. The baron was about to break out again with some strenuousness in favor of his own view of the matter when Count Staumn made a proposition

that was eagerly accepted by all save Brunfels himself.

"Argument," said Count Staumn, "is ever the enemy of good comradeship. Let us settle the point at once, and finally, with the dice-box. Baron Brunfels, you are too seasoned a gambler to object to such a mode of terminating a discussion. Steinmetz, the law, of which you are so distinguished a representative, is often compared to a lottery; so you cannot look with disfavor upon a method that is as conclusive and as reasonably fair as the average decision of a judge. Let us throw, therefore, for the life of the king. I, as chairman of this meeting, will be umpire. Single throws, and the highest number wins. Baron Brunfels, you will act for the king, and if you win may bestow upon the monarch his life. Chancellor Steinmetz stands for the state. If he wins, then is the king's life forfeit. Gentlemen, are you agreed?"

"Agreed, agreed," cried the conspirators, with practically unanimous voice.

Baron Brunfels grumbled somewhat, but when the dice-horn was brought, and he heard the rattle of the bones within the leathern cylinder, the light of a gambler's love shone in his eyes and he made no further protest.

The ex-chancellor took the dice-box in his hand, and was about to shake, when there suddenly came upon them three stout raps against the door, given apparently with the hilt of a sword. Many not already standing started to their feet, and nearly all looked one upon another with deep dismay in their glances. The full company of conspirators were present; exactly a score of men knew of the rendezvous, and now the twenty-first man outside was beating the oaken panels. The knocking was repeated, but now accompanied by the words:

"Open, I beg of you."

Count Staumn left the table, and stealthily as a cat approached the door.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"A wayfarer, weary and wet, who seeks shelter from the storm."

"My house is already filled," spoke up the count. "I have no room for another."

"Open the door peacefully," cried the outlander, "and do not put me to the necessity of forcing it."

There was a ring of decision in the voice which sent quick pallor to more than one cheek. Ex-Chancellor Steinmetz rose to his feet with terror in his

eyes and chattering teeth; he seemed to recognize the invisible speaker. Count Staumn looked over his shoulder at the assemblage with an expression that plainly said, "What am I to do?"

"In the fiend's name," hissed Baron Brunfels, taking the precaution, however, to speak scarce above his breath, "if you are so frightened when it comes to a knock at the door, what will it be when the real knocks are upon you? Open, Count, and let the insistent stranger in. Whether he leave the place alive or no, there are twenty men here to answer."

The count undid the fastenings and threw open the door. There entered a tall man, completely enveloped in a dark cloak that was dripping wet. Drawn over his eyes was a hunter's hat of felt, with a drooping, bedraggled feather on it. The door was immediately closed and barred behind him, and the stranger, pausing a moment when confronted by so many inquiring eyes, flung off his cloak, throwing it over the back of a chair; then he removed his hat with a sweep, sending the raindrops flying. The intriguants gazed at him speechless, with varying emotions. They saw before them his Majesty, Rudolph, King of Alluria.

If the king had any suspicion of his danger, he gave no token of it. On his smooth, lofty forehead there was no trace of frown and no sign of fear. His was a manly figure, rather over than under six feet in height; not slim and gaunt like Count Staumn's, nor yet stout to excess like that of Baron Brunfels. The finger of time had touched with frost the hair at his temples, and there were threads of white in his pointed beard, but his sweeping mustache was still as black as the night from which he came. His frank, clear, honest eyes swept the company, resting momentarily on each; then he said in a firm voice, without the suspicion of a tremor in it:

"Gentlemen, I give you good evening; and although the hospitality of Count Staumn has needed spurring, I lay that not up against him, because I am well aware his apparent reluctance arose through the unexpectedness of my visit; and if the count will act as cup-bearer, we will drown all remembrance of a barred door in a flagon of wine, for, to tell the truth, gentlemen, I have ridden hard in order to have the pleasure of drinking with you."

As the king spoke these ominous words, he cast a glance of piercing intensity upon

the company, and more than one quailed under it. He strode to the fireplace, spurs jingling as he went, and stood with his back to the fire, spreading out his hands to the blaze. Count Staumn left the bolted door, took an empty flagon from the shelf, filled it at the barrel in the corner, and, with a low bow, presented the brimming measure to the king.

Rudolph held aloft his beaker of Burgundy, and as he did so spoke in a loud voice that rang to the beams of the ceiling:

"Gentlemen, I give you a suitable toast. May none here gathered encounter a more pitiless storm than that which is raging without."

With this he drank off the wine, and, inclining his head slightly to the count, returned the flagon. No one, save the king, had spoken since he entered. Every word he had uttered seemed charged with double meaning, and brought to the suspicious minds of his hearers visions of a trysting-place surrounded by troops and the king standing there playing with them as a tiger plays with its victims. His easy confidence appalled them. When first he came in, several who were seated remained so, but one by one they rose to their feet, with the exception of Baron Brunfels, although he, when the king gave the toast, also stood. It was clear enough their glances of fear were not directed towards the king, but towards Baron Brunfels. Several pairs of eyes beseeched him in silent supplication, but the baron met none of these glances, for his gaze was fixed upon the king.

Every man present knew the baron to be reckless of consequences, frankly outspoken, thoroughly a man of the sword, and a despiser of diplomacy. They feared that at any moment he might blurt out the purport of the meeting, and more than one was thankful for the crafty ex-chancellor's planning, who, throughout, had insisted there should be no documentary evidence of their designs, either in their houses or on their persons. Some startling rumor must have reached the king's ear to bring him thus unexpectedly upon them. The anxiety of all was that some one should persuade the king that they were merely a storm-besieged hunting-party. They trembled in anticipation of Baron Brunfels's open candor, and dreaded the revealing of the real cause of their conference. There was now no chance to warn him: a man who spoke his mind, who never looked an inch beyond his nose,

even though his head should roll off in consequence; and if a man does not value his own head, how can he be expected to care for the heads of his neighbors?

"I ask you to be seated," said the king, with a wave of his hand.

Now, what should that stubborn fool of a baron do but remain standing when all but Rudolph the king and himself had seated themselves, thus drawing his Majesty's attention directly towards him and

therefore, to the conclusion that you play for a human life. Whose life is in the cast, my Lord of Brunfels?"

Before the baron could reply, ex-Chancellor Steinmetz rose with some indecision to his feet. He began, in trembling voice:

"I beg your gracious permission to explain the reason of our gathering—"

"Herr Steinmetz," cried the king, sternly, "when I



"THE KING STOOD UNMOVED AS BARON BRUNFELS WAS ABOUT TO RUSH UPON HIM."

making a colloquy between them well nigh inevitable. Those next the ex-chancellor were nudging him, in God's name, to stand also, and open whatever discussion there must ensue between themselves and his Majesty, so that it might be smoothly carried on. But the ex-chancellor was ashen gray with fear, and his hand trembled on the table.

"My Lord of Brunfels," said the king, a smile hovering about his lips, "I see that I have interrupted you at your old pleasure of dicing. While requesting you to continue your game as though I had not joined you, may I venture to hope the stakes you play for are not high?"

Every one held his breath, awaiting with deepest concern the reply of the frowning baron; and, when it came growling forth, there was little in it to ease their disquiet.

"Your Majesty," said Baron Brunfels, "the stakes are the highest that a gambler may play for."

"You tempt me, Baron, to guess that the hazard is a man's soul; but I see that your adversary is my worthy ex-chancellor, and as I should hesitate to impute to him the character of the devil, I am led,

desire your interference I shall call for it; and remember this, Herr Steinmetz, the man who begins a game must play it to the end, even though he finds luck running against him."

The ex-chancellor sat down again, and drew his hand across his damp forehead.

"Your Majesty," spoke up the baron, a ring of defiance in his voice, "I speak not for my comrades, but for myself. I begin no game I am afraid to finish. We were about to dice in order to discover whether your Majesty should live or die."

A simultaneous moan seemed to rise from the assembled traitors. The smile returned to the king's lips.

"Baron," he said, "I have ever chided myself for loving you, for you were always a bad example to weak and impressionable natures. Even when your overbearing, obstinate intolerance compelled me to dismiss you from the command of my army, I could not but admire your sturdy honesty. Had I been able to graft your

love of truth upon some of my councilors, what a valuable group of advisers might I have gathered round me. But we have had enough of comedy, and now tragedy sets in. Those who are traitors to their ruler must not be surprised if a double traitor is one of their number. Why am I here? Why do two hundred mounted and armed men surround this doomed chalet? Miserable wretches, what have you to say that judgment be not instantly passed upon you?"

"I have this to say," roared Baron Brunfels, drawing his sword, "that whatever may befall this assemblage, you, at least, shall not live to boast of it."

The king stood unmoved as Baron Brunfels was about to rush upon him; but Count Staumn and others threw themselves between the baron and his victim, seeing in the king's words some intimation of mercy to be held out to them could but actual assault upon his person be prevented.

"My Lord of Brunfels," said the king, calmly, "sheath your sword. Your ancestors have often drawn it, but always for, and never against, the occupant of the throne. Now, gentlemen, hear my decision, and abide faithfully by it. Seat yourselves at the table, ten on each side, the dice-box between you. You shall not be disappointed, but shall play out the game of life and death. Each dices with his opposite. He who throws the highest number escapes. He who throws the lowest, places his weapons on the empty chair, and stands against yonder wall to be executed for the traitor that he is. Thus half of your company shall live, and the other half shall seek death with such courage as may be granted them. Do you agree, or shall I give the signal?"

With unanimous voice they agreed, all excepting Baron Brunfels, who spoke not.

"Come, Baron, you and my devoted ex-chancellor were about to play when I came in. Begin the game."

"Very well," replied the baron, nonchalantly. "Steinmetz, the dice-box is near your hand; throw."

Some one placed the cubes in the leathern cup and handed it to the ex-chancellor, whose shivering fingers relieved him of the necessity of shaking the box. The dice rolled out on the table—a three, a four, and a one. Those nearest reported the total.

"Eight!" cried the king. "Now, Baron."

Baron Brunfels carelessly threw the dice into their receptacle, and a moment after the spotted bones clattered on the table.

"Three sixes!" cried the baron. "If I only had such luck when I played for money!"

The ex-chancellor's eyes were starting from his head, wild with fear.

"We have three throws," he screamed.

"Not so," said the king.

"I swear I understood that we were to have three chances," shrieked Steinmetz, springing from his chair. "But it is all illegal, and not to be borne. I will not have my life diced away to please either king or commons."

He drew his sword, and placed himself in an attitude of defense.

"Seize him; disarm him, and bind him," commanded the king. "There are enough gentlemen in this company to see that the rules of the game are adhered to."

Steinmetz, struggling and pleading for mercy, was speedily overpowered and bound; then his captors placed him against the wall, and resumed their seats at the table. The next man to be doomed was Count Staumn. The count rose from his chair, bowed to the king and to the assembled company, drew forth his sword, broke it over his knee, and walked to the wall of the condemned.

The remainder of the fearful contest was carried on in silence, but with great celerity, and before a quarter of an hour was past, ten men had their backs to the wall, while the remaining ten were seated at the table, some on one side, and some on the other.

The men ranged against the wall were downcast, for however bravely a soldier may meet death in a hostile encounter, it is a different matter to face it bound and helpless at the hands of the executioner.

A shade of sadness seemed to overspread the countenance of the king, who still occupied the position he had taken at the first, with his back towards the fire.

Baron Brunfels shifted uneasily in his seat, and glanced now and then with compassion at his sentenced comrades. He was first to break the silence.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I am always loath to see a coward die. The whimperings of your former chancellor annoy me; therefore will I gladly take his place, and give to him the life and liberty you perhaps design for me, if, in exchange, I have the privilege of speaking my mind regarding you and your precious kingship."

"Unbind the valiant Steinmetz," said

the king. "Speak your mind freely, Baron Brunfels."

The baron rose, drew his sword from the scabbard, and placed it on the table.

"Your Majesty, backed by brute force," he began, "has condemned to death ten of your subjects. You have branded us as traitors, and such we are, and so find no fault with your sentence, merely recognizing that you represent, for the time being, the upper hand. You have reminded me that my ancestors fought for yours and they never turned their swords against their sovereign. Why, then, have our swords been pointed toward your breast? Because, King Rudolph, you are yourself a traitor. You belong to the ruling class, and have turned your back upon your order.

You, a king, have made yourself a brother to the demagogue on the street corner, yearning for the cheap applause of the serf. You have shorn nobility of its privileges, and for what?"

"And for what?" echoed the king, with rising voice. "For this: that the plowman on the plain may reap what he has sown; that the shepherd on the hillside may enjoy the increase which comes to his flock; that taxation may be light; that my nobles should deal honestly with the people and not use their position for thievery and depredation; that those whom the state honors by appointing to positions of trust shall content themselves with the recompense lawfully given and refrain from peculation; that peace and security shall rest on the land; and that bloodthirsty swashbucklers shall not go up and down, inciting the people to carnage and rapine under the name of patriotism; that



"BARON BRUNFELS CRIED ALOUD: 'GENTLEMEN, THE KING!'"

the kingdom of Alluria may live in amity with its neighbors, attending to its own affairs and meddling not with the concerns of others. This is the task I set myself when I came to the throne. What fault have you to find with the program, my Lord Baron?"

"The simple fault that it is the program of a fool," replied the baron, calmly. "In following it you have gained the resentment of your nobles and have not even received the thanks of those pitiable hinds, the plowmen in the valley, or the shepherds on the hills. You have impoverished us so that the clowns may have a few more coins with which to muddle in drink their already stupid brains. You are hated in cot and castle alike. You would not stand in your place for a moment, were not an army behind you. Being a fool, you think the common people like honesty, whereas they only curse

that they have not a share in the thieving."

"The people," said the king, soberly, "have been misled. Their ear has been abused by calumny and falsehood. Had it been possible for me personally to explain to them the good that must ultimately accrue to the land where honesty rules, I am confident I would have had their united and undivided support, even though my nobles deserted me."

"Not so, your Majesty; they would listen to you and cheer you, but when the next orator came among them, promising to divide the moon and give a share to each, they would gather round his banner and hoot you from the kingdom. What care they for rectitude of government? They see no farther than the shining florin that glitters on their palm. When your nobles were rich, they came to their castles among the people and scattered their gold with a lavish hand. Little recked the peasant how it was got, so long as he shared it. 'There,' they said, 'the coin comes to us that we have not worked for.' But now, with castles deserted and retainers dismissed, the people have to sweat to wring from traders the reluctant silver, and they cry, 'Thus it was not in times of old, and this king is the cause of it;' and so they spit upon your name, and shrug their shoulders when your honesty is mentioned. And now, Rudolph of Alluria, I have done, and I go the more jauntily to my death that I have had fair speech with you before the end."

The king, whose gaze had been fixed upon the floor before him, drew a deep sigh, and when he looked up at them, his eyes were veiled with moisture.

"I thought," he said slowly, "until to-night, that I had possessed some qualities, at least, of a ruler of men. I came here alone among you, and although there are brave men in this company, yet I had the ordering of events as I chose to order them, notwithstanding that odds stood a score to one against me. I still venture to think that whatever failures have attended my eight years' rule in Alluria arose from faults of my own, and not through imperfections in the plan or want of appreciation in the people. I have now to inform you that if it is disastrous for a king to act without the coöperation of his nobles, it is equally disastrous for them to

plot against their leader. I beg to acquaint you with the fact that the insurrection so carefully prepared has broken prematurely out. My capital is in possession of the factions, who are industriously cutting each other's throats to settle which one of two smooth-tongued rascals shall be their president. While you were dicing to settle the fate of an already deposed king, and I was sentencing you to a mythical death, we were all alike being involved in common ruin. I have seen to-night more property in flames than all my savings during the last eight years would pay for. I have no horsemen at my back, and have stumbled here blindly, a much bedraggled fugitive, having lost my way in every sense of the phrase. And so I beg of the hospitality of Count Staumn another flagon of wine, and either a place of shelter for my patient horse, who has been left too long in the storm without, or else direction towards the frontier, whereupon my horse and I will set out to find it."

"Not towards the frontier!" cried Baron Brunfels, grasping again his sword and holding it aloft, "But towards the capital! We will surround you, and hew for you a way through that fickle mob back to the throne of your ancestors."

Each man sprang to his weapon, and brandished it above his head, while a ringing cheer echoed to the timbered ceiling.

"The king! The king!" they cried.

Rudolph smiled, and shook his head.

"Not so," he said. "I leave a thankless throne with a joy I find it impossible to express. As I sat on horseback, half way up the hill above the burning city, and heard the clash of arms, I was filled with amazement to think that men would actually fight for the position of ruler of the people. Whether the insurrection has brought freedom to themselves or not, the future will alone tell; but it has, at least, brought freedom to me. I now belong to myself. No man can question either my motives or my acts. Gentlemen, drink with me to the new president of Alluria, whoever he may be."

But the king drank alone, none other raising flagon to lip.

Then Baron Brunfels cried aloud:

"*Gentlemen, the king!*"

And never in the history of Alluria was a toast so heartily honored.

